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AUTHOR Greenberg, Reva M.
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ABSTRACT

Because relationships with family and friends may cause stress for women, the effects of interactions with family, friends, and community on women's adaption to the experiences of aging are important. Interviews were conducted with 75 women between the ages of 44 and 77 who were educated, relieved of child-rearing responsibilities, and relatively unemcumbered by income and social restraints. The late parental years, when children no longer live at home and husbands are still working, were investigated. Of the eight typologies of life-style orientations developed from data analysis, four typologies emerged most often: Paid Worker, Volunteer Worker, Uncommitted Worker, and Family Woman. The Paid Worker, Volunteer Worker, and Family Woman were deeply involved in their activities and scored high in life satisfaction. The Uncommitted Worker, in contrast, was less involved and scored lower in life satisfaction. Informal relationships correlated most significantly with life satisfaction; husbands, friends, children, siblings, parents, and grandchildren all played major roles in the women's lives. Most women viewed the late parental years as satisfying years of self-development. (NRB)

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OLDER WOMEN: THE MEANING OF INVOLVEMENT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

By

Reva M. Greenberg, Ed.D

Fordham University at Lincoln Center

New York City

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Informal networks of family and friends help to establish us in a comfortable, familiar context. Yet these same meaningful relationships may be a source of stress for families and especially for women. Women in the middle years may be caught, as Brody (1979) wrote, "between the competing demands of multiple responsibilities to spouse, self, the younger generation and work." There are twenty-two million women aged 45-64 who represent the future elderly in the United States. It is necessary to review the strengths these women have and those they will need to deal with the issues of everyday life. This study* was concerned with how interaction with family, friends and community affects women's adaption to the experiences of aging.

Current studies of older women in the gerontological literature range in interest from personality to social policy. The fit between a woman's life style and personality appears to be a key factor in her well being. Both Clausen (1976) and Livson (1976) suggested that women would do well to stick to those roles that make them most comfortable. Additionally, an overview of personality in middle-aged women presented by Noberini and Neugarten (1975) concluded that the adaptive aspects of these women's personalities show considerable consistency over time. These findings suggest that behavior patterns discerned during and after the late parental years may reflect long-standing adaptive patterns, characteristic of each woman

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and may be of predictive value.

In terms of family life and kinship, a number of studies indicate that late parental years may find a woman as a part of "the caught generation" (Bernard, 1975) sandwiched between children and parents. These years nevertheless are generally viewed by women as satisfactory ones. To many, the late parental years are seen as a time of increased freedom (Hagestad, 1977). Early planning for the time when the children would be gone from the home provided an opportunity to use their energies in new directions. When children leave the home, many women who have not already done so, turn or return to careers; nearly one third of all female workers are 45 years of age or over (U.S. Department of Labor, 1976).

The marital relationship appears to improve during the years between the departure of the children and retirement (Deutscher, 1964; Glenn, 1976; Lowenthal, et al., 1975). These results complement Lopata's (1973) findings that Americans put great emphasis on the role of wife. Upper middle class women, she found, are most likely to value their role of wife above others.

Women's strengths were underscored by Hess (1976), who suggested that some of the remarkable resilience of older women noted in the literature may have its roots in many women's abilities to make friendships and invest them with intimacy. These strengths may help women develop the strong personal networks of social support that Stephens, et al. (1978) suggested

enhance the quality of later life.

Findings from research (Cantor, 1975; Sussman, 1977; Shanas, 1979) document the substantial support family and friends give to the elderly. Further, there is evidence that the vast majority of services are provided by a spouse (if living) and by daughters and daughters-in-law (Litman, 1971; Horowitz, 1978). Smith (1979) added a new dimension and wrote about the effects of role strain on the middle generation, while Brody, et al. (1979), suggested that if social policy is to keep abreast with social change, the relationship between women's activities and their ability to provide services to older relatives must be closely watched.

Collecting the Data

This study was based upon interviews with seventy-five women, aged forty-four to seventy-seven (median age, fifty-eight). The sample was drawn from a relatively stable and homogeneous, upper middle class district in an East Coast metropolitan suburban area. Rather than looking at age which often is not an accurate marker of life events in the adult years, the study focused on a stage in the life-cycle - the late parental years. The sample was married women whose children no longer lived at home and whose husbands were still working. All respondents were at least high school graduates and had similar socio-economic backgrounds. The focus was on the experiences of a specific group -- the educated woman. Formal education is a crucial variable in the successful social engagement of women. It enables

them great accessability to options. By exploring this group's subjective experiences, it is possible to begin to clarify the issues that confront women, relieved of child-rearing responsibilities and relatively unencumbered by income and social restraints.

The seventy-five interviews were conducted in a location picked by the respondents at hours convenient to them. Most of the interviews were held during the weekday. Some working women preferred evening and weekend appointments. The average interview lasted one and one-half hours. A structured interview, composed of a questionnaire that included open-ended, closed-ended and scale items, was used. The closed-ended socio-demographic section included questions on family composition and quantitative involvement in informal and formal networks. An open-ended approach was used to obtain comprehensive information on perceptions and self-definitions of the meaning of relationships with family, friends, and the larger community. Scale items included questions on self-perceived involvement, satisfaction and time spent in present supportive networks. Life satisfaction was measured by the Havighurst-Neugarten Life Satisfaction Inventory, Form Z (LSIZ) as modified by Adams (1969). Self-esteem was measured by a scale developed by Rosenberg (1968).

Life Style Orientations

The data analysis developed eight typologies of life-style orientations. They were based upon a combination of self-perceived involvement in the roles of daughter, wife, mother, grandmother,

sister and friend, and time spent and self-perceived involvement in the roles of paid worker and volunteer worker. The four types that presented reasonable numbers were a focus of the study. They were the Paid Worker (a full-time paid worker, 23%), the Volunteer Worker (a full-time paid volunteer worker, 12%), the Uncommitted Worker (a full-time paid or volunteer worker, 21%), and the Family Woman (a part-time paid or volunteer worker, 23%). These orientations reflect individual social role participation and therefore the special relationship each woman had with the varied aspects of her world.

Three of the prototypes, the Paid Worker, the Volunteer Worker and the Family Woman, were persons who invested not only time, but a deep quality of involvement in their activities. They seemed able to define their needs, exercise some options and reap satisfying rewards. Their involvement patterns related to high life satisfaction scores (means of 31.2, 32.0 and 31.3, respectively, of a possible 36.0).

In contrast, the Uncommitted Worker invested time, but a lower level of involvement in her affiliations. She appeared less content with her life and had lower life satsifaction scores (mean 26.6). This woman reported having difficulty in finding personal rewards in her family, friend or community relationships. She showed a pattern of uncertainty about the goals she wanted to pursue, how to incorporate the new norms for women into her own plans and what would make her happy. Because this woman was financially secure and did not have to work to increase the family income, she had the luxury and the burden of having to deal with

the question of "What do I really want to do with myself?" A thorny issue for many women, it may be a particularly difficult one for this vulnerable type of person.

The basic nature of the work orientations varied among the four life styles. Foci ranged from paid work to volunteer work to familial affairs. However, it was the informal relationships that correlated most significantly with life satisfaction. All of the women are strikingly family/friend centered despite some impressive work histories. Husbands, friends and children were important as emotional supports; husbands and friends as social partners. Siblings and parents were less often cited as resources for meaningful interactions and grandchildren were an undisputed source of joy.

The study illuminated the range of needs, wishes and abilities women bring to the experiences of aging. There was no one magic pattern applicable to and successful for all. Rather, each woman sought her own answer; a response which reflected her personality, as well as the influences and resources of her social worlds. It is noteworthy that the majority of the women in this study found rewarding relationships among their available options. Indeed, many women spoke of the opportunities these years hold for self-development. They saw it as a time to focus on oneself, freed from the role demands of former days:

> I try to select things to do that fill my needs,
> I try not to get involved with too many 'shoulds'.

In addition, the findings suggest that it is the intensity or quality of involvement, rather than just time spent in any

role, that related to subjective measures of life satisfaction. For these women, high involvement in self-perceived satisfying relationships and activities in either or both the informal or formal networks related to high life satisfaction and self-esteem. The four life styles reflect these conclusions and the words spoken by the women vividly convey the meanings these relationships held for them.

The Meaning of Involvement with Family and Friends

These women were wives on a daily basis. For most, her husband made her feel like an important person. She enjoyed his company and turned to him with her problems. She remarked that:

> My husband is tremendously supportive of me. We share a lot together.
>
> He's easy going and is a calming influence on me. I rely on his judgment to augment my own.

The marital relationship, without children at home, was less tense and more rewarding since discussions involving the children seemed vulnerable to arguments. Her husband was often seen as a real companion now:

> It's a delightful, different world since the children left. We're more relaxed. We go out when we want. It's a gift to be alone together.

However, some husbands could be more demanding than in earlier years, encroaching on a woman's perceived need for space to develop herself:

> He is very supportive and encouraging. However, since the children left he has gotten more time consuming. He likes me to travel and play golf with him. He feels I can have more time for him because there are no children around.

For a small number of women, the relationship presented difficult moments. A Partial Worker stated:

> My husband definitely has an influence on me. We usually do what he wants to do, especially when we are together ... and we are together a lot.

In all instances, however, the husband held a pivotal spot in the emotional and social worlds of these women.

Friends were another major link in these women's lives. They were confidants with whom you could discuss your problems, as well as crucial parts of a social life. These women either saw or spoke to one or more friends often during the week and 70 percent reported that being a friend was a very satisfying role. Women spoke of "close and dear friends" or "friends who are a big support with my problems." A prominent theme was the "need" to be with people:

> I love my social activities. They are fun. It is a way to see and be with people. Friends are a big support.

> My social life is stimulating. It keeps up my social contacts and gives me companionship.

Children played a major role in the emotional lives of these women and a peripheral role in their social lives. They were seen as boosters of self esteem and as persons to turn to in time of crisis. However, unlike husbands and friends, they were not often cited as social companions. Exceptions to this were holiday and family occasions when children were usually first on the guest list.

Although these women were no longer mothers on a live-in basis, they saw themselves as actively involved mothers. Child-

ren were often emotionally only as far away as the nearest telephone or mailbox. Fifty-nine percent of them spoke to a child several times a week. Conversations reflected current interests of both generations: changing life styles, divorce, financial needs, health problems, aging relatives, financial concerns, social events and babysitting.

Most women mentioned that their children made few major demands upon their time. Most seemed to prefer it that way:

> At first there was a void when the children left, but now I get annoyed when they come home and make a mess.

These women had time for themselves now and they wanted to focus on it. This was especially so for the working woman:

> You can't develop yourself if the children are always around. If they live too close by, they take up a tremendous amount of your time. When the children were younger, life centered around them. After they move out, you're free.

Most preferred to limit interactions to social occasions or "assisting" when called upon. For some, however, such as the Family Woman, who represented 30 percent of the sample, family relations and helping the children were a major center of attention. One reported that:

> I'm here if I'm needed. I give up my time for them.

However, even she added this caveat:

> During the summer I give up my volunteer work for them but they are at a distance so being with them is not constant.

Another facet of informal relationships is the role of sister and/or sister-in-law. Only thirty-three women reported being very involved in this role. For some, distance was a major factor for the lack of contact. For many others, that was "just the way it is". As Candy (1977) suggested, relatives are often not considered best friends.

Parents represent another area of involvement. Forty-seven percent of this sample did not have living older relatives. However, of those with living parents and/or in-laws, only twenty-seven percent found these relationships very satisfying.

Not surprisingly, the positive statements usually reflected a situation where the interactions were principally of a social nature. The daughter often characterized these "Moms" and "Dads" (usually a "Mom") as "healthy", "competent", "not demanding" and, most importantly, "independent". Women reported:

> I enjoy visiting her. She's very active and independent. There are no unpleasant tasks.

> I am very lucky. She's very independent and not a burden.

The less satisfactory relationships often accompany the feelings of daughters involved in the more time consuming, chore-oriented activities. It appears that the greater the self perceived physical and emotional demands, the more problematic the relationship. These patterns raise the potentially difficult issues of caring for an aging parent which car arise from the conflicting needs of the generations.

The daughters desperately desired the older person to remain independent and undemanding. This was often impossible

for the elder who faced losses that created normal dependencies. Daughters sadly remarked on the consequences of this dilemma:

> My mother-in-law is 89 and not ambulatory. It is physically and mentally time consuming to deal with her.
>
> Taking care of my sick mother was horrendous. It was strength consuming. I did what I felt I must do and then I felt I must preserve my own sanity.

In fact, too many requests for aid could prove to be a serious problem. One woman, reflecting on the human crunch - a result of juggling the needs of children, friends, husband and parents - asked, "When's my turn?"

Involvement as a grandmother often typified this effort to balance family involvement with personal time. Most women described themselves as involved, doting grandmothers who enjoyed their grandchildren and worked hard to achieve good relationships. However, when discussing the parameters of this involvement, most women explained that they were happy "to assist" upon occasion and to babysit "when it fits into my schedule". Many women did have very busy schedules but most did make family interest high priorities.

It is noteworthy that the majority of these women found rewarding relationships among their available options. Their family and friends helped them to maintain a positive sense of self and provided meaningful support on an ongoing basis.

However, it takes interest and skill to keep these networks viable and strong. An ill parent, a jobless spouse, a divorcing child, a visiting grandchild can put real pressure on

prior commitments to self and others. A woman stated:

> As I move toward greater awareness of my own needs and feel happier about myself, I still find coming to terms with saying 'no', without feeling guilty, a difficult issue.

How does a woman find a comfortable balance between her need for individual expression and her desire for family/group cohesion? A contemporary woman faces this eternal question confronted by a backdrop of dynamic demographic and social factors. Her solutions affect our planning.

One area of concern, the care of aging relatives, highlights the dilemma. These women reported that relationships with friends, husbands, children and siblings supported them as they in turn supported their aging relatives. However, absorbed by a variety of commitments, there may be limits on availability, ability or willingness to provide the necessary support. In addition, the woman may decide she is willing, but finds she is unable or unavailable. Care is provided but the emotional and financial cost may be very high.

Many of these front-line caregivers need help in order to maintain their elderly relatives in the community to the mutual satisfaction of both generations. Support can come in two forms. First, we might draw upon these women's interest in self-development and their concern with family/friend relationships to attract them to programs which will reinforce their strengths and update their skills. Topics might include: attitudes toward aging, personal and social competencies and the emotional and practical components of care for elderly relatives.

In addition, there is a pressing need for the concurrent development of a wide range of community based services to supplement existing family efforts. Freeing the caregiver of some time-consuming instrumental jobs, where others would be acceptable substitutes, could allow her to comfortably perform the more personal tasks.

Most of the women in this study had come to understand their own needs and were able to immerse themselves in a range of self-satisfying relations. Family and friends made life more satisfying:

> It's a very secure feeling to know that people will be there to help you when you need them.
>
> I help them ... they help me. It's very reciprocal.

But, present day shifting personal priorities and social values do put new limitations on the boundaries of this reciprocity.

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